

Congressman Mel Watt's Biography

Melvin L. Watt ("Mel") was born in Mecklenburg County, North Carolina on August 26, 1945. He is a graduate of York Road High School in Charlotte. He was a Phi Beta Kappa graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1967 with a BS degree in Business Administration and was the president of the business honors fraternity as a result of having the highest academic average in the Business School. In 1970 he received a JD degree from Yale University Law School and was a published member of the Yale Law Journal. He has been awarded honorary degrees from North Carolina A&T State University, Johnson C. Smith University and Bennett College.

Mel practiced law with the law firm formerly known as Chambers, Stein, Ferguson and Becton from 1971-1992. He has been a small business owner and is currently part owner of a 120-bed assisted living facility for elderly and handicapped residents.

Mel was the campaign manager of Harvey Gantt's campaigns for City Council, for Mayor of Charlotte and for the United States Senate. Mel served one term in the North Carolina Senate (1985-86) where he was called "the conscience of the Senate." He did not seek a second term in the state Senate and announced that he would not consider running for elective office again until his children completed high school.

In 1992 (after both his children completed high school), Mel was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives from North Carolina's 12th Congressional District, North Carolina's most urban congressional district, and became one of only two African American members elected to Congress from North Carolina in the 20th century.

Mel is a member of the House Financial Services Committee, the House Judiciary Committee (on which he serves as Ranking Member on the Subcommittee on Commercial and Administrative Law) and the House/Senate Joint Economic Committee. In 1999, the Congressional Quarterly highlighted Mel in its article, "50 Ways to Do the Job of Congress" and recognized him as one of 28 "Emerging Players" in the post-September 11th Congress in 2002.

Mel is married to Eulada Paysour Watt, an educator. They have two sons, Brian and Jason, both with undergraduate degrees from Yale University and graduate degrees from other universities.

Mel is a member of the Mt. Olive Presbyterian Church and a life member of the NAACP. He served as president of the Mecklenburg County Bar and has been a member of many professional, community and civic boards and organizations.

Mel enjoys tennis, running, reading and music. Since 1995 he has been the starting pitcher for the Democratic baseball team in the annual Congressional Baseball Game and was named most valuable player in 1995, 1996 and 2000.

Congressional Mission Statement

As a member of the United States House of Representatives, I have two important goals:

1. My constituent services goal is to help my constituents understand how their federal government works, what services their federal government can and should provide and how they can obtain these services.
2. My legislative goal is to play a principled, constructive role in crafting, evaluating, sponsoring and passing effective legislation that will benefit my constituents and the nation.

To achieve these goals, I want to use my unique background, education and life experiences to influence public policy in positive ways and to deliver substantial benefits to individual, business and institutional constituents in the communities I represent throughout the 12th District.

Official Photos



Congressman Watt speaks at the opening of the Rams Common dormitory at Winston-Salem State University.



Congressman Watt explains the legislative process to 12th District students visiting Washington.



Congressman Watt works as a bank teller in Greensboro during Trading Places.



Congressman Watt tours Kurz, Inc. in Charlotte and learns how hot foil stamping can help protect against counterfeit currency. Kurz is one of many cutting-edge companies located in the 12th Congressional District.



Congressman Watt catches a ride at Concord Regional Airport during his annual Trading Places week.

Articles of Interest

PUBLIC LIVES; He Has Reason to Ponder the Shape of Things to Come

April 29, 2000

New York Times

By KEVIN SACK

SITTING in his nondescript office, stealing bites of a turkey club between his 1 o'clock with the editorial board and his 2:30 with the bank president, Representative **Melvin Watt** begins to wonder whether his district office here is still within his Congressional district. It used to be. That much he knows. But now? There's no telling.

Mr. Watt, a black Democrat from nearby Charlotte, can be forgiven his confusion. His district, North Carolina's 12th, has been drawn three different ways in four years, thanks to a protracted court battle that has made it one of the most litigated gerrymanders in history. While Americans fill out their census forms to help determine the shape and allocation of Congressional districts for 10 years to come, the courts are still trying to decide how the North Carolina 12th should have been configured for the last eight.

More than any of his 434 colleagues in the House, Mr. Watt has been caught between the Voting Rights Act's prohibition against the dilution of minority voting strength and the Supreme Court's 1995 edict that race cannot be used as a predominant factor in designing legislative districts.

Though he regrets the instability and feels that the case has dragged on far too long, Mr. Watt said it had been important to battle those who argue that minority candidates no longer need special help in overcoming racial voting patterns. Even he agrees that the North Carolina General Assembly, the state's legislature, went too far in 1992 when it created a bizarrely shaped district where 53 percent of the voting-age population was black. But the playing field still needs leveling, he said, because even now many whites refuse to consider black candidates.

"There are still whites who under no circumstance will vote for a black person," he said. "They're never going to touch me, they're never going to be in a room with me. As far as they're concerned, I'm not their congressman."

Under pressure from the Bush administration to create majority-black districts in 1992, the General Assembly concocted a 165-mile-long district that connected black population centers in Charlotte, Greensboro and Durham with a tether that was often no wider than Interstate 85. One of Mr. Watt's opponents that year observed that he could "drive down I-85 with both car doors open and hit every person in the district."

That map was rejected by the Supreme Court in 1996 as an unconstitutional racial gerrymander. A new plan was drawn in 1997 but was struck down by a federal district court before it could be used in 1998. The legislature then devised a third plan, which was used that year but was thrown out by the district court last month. The Supreme Court ordered that the never-used 1997 plan be dusted off for the primaries next Tuesday, while holding out the remote possibility that the lines will be redrawn again before the general election in November. Understand?

"It's a nuisance," said Mr. Watt, who is running this year for a fifth term. "I guess if I hadn't practiced law for 22 years and didn't understand exactly what was happening each time, I could get exasperated by it."

CLEARLY, Mr. Watt's constituents are exasperated. They write him letters of utter puzzlement, and he has devoted much of his breakneck Easter recess schedule to explaining the changes. It took more than an hour to fashion a written explanation to one woman.

"I'm currently her representative but I'm not going to be running in the same district that I currently represent so next year I can't be her representative because the district lines will have changed and she's going out," he said, sucking in air. "I mean, you know, it's almost impossible to explain that to somebody."

Mr. Watt, 54, has learned to tailor his community presentations, depending on whether he is speaking on old turf or new. He has had to resist the temptation to shun areas where those he helps will no longer be eligible to return the favor by voting for him in November. On Tuesday night, Democratic officials held a "Welcome Back Mel" reception in Greensboro, a city that was originally in his district, then was out, and now is back in again.

The endless redistricting has also confounded the three candidates vying in the Republican primary to challenge Mr. Watt. All three spent

time campaigning in areas where, as things have turned out, there are now no votes. One of them, Chad Mitchell, has discovered that he no longer lives in the district, but is running anyway. (Members of Congress do not have to live in the districts they represent.)

Mr. Watt was born just outside Charlotte on Aug. 26, 1945, and grew up in a house without electricity or running water. He became one of the first black students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, got a law degree from Yale and then established a civil rights law practice in Charlotte.

His introduction to politics came as a strategist, not a candidate. He ran the groundbreaking mayoral campaign of his friend Harvey Gantt, who became Charlotte's first black mayor, and then managed Mr. Gantt's storied 1990 challenge to Senator Jesse Helms.

After that hardball campaign, in which he and Mr. Gantt failed to anticipate Mr. Helms's racially divisive tactics, Mr. Watt decided to move out of the back rooms and into the spotlight. As both a candidate and a congressman, he has been known for a courtly manner, dapper dress and a continuing passion for civil rights and other traditionally liberal causes.

The district that Mr. Watt will run in this year is actually better for him than the previous one, though not so advantageous as the 1992 lines. The voting-age population will be 43 percent black and 71 percent Democratic, as opposed to 33 percent black and 65 percent Democratic in 1998, when his share of the vote dropped.

As the shape of his district has changed, Mr. Watt has had to shift some priorities and study issues once unfamiliar. Because the 1998 plan added large parts of rural Rowan County, site of a V.A. hospital, he found himself taking aggressive stands in favor of veterans' programs and dairy price supports. Sometimes, he says, his district's rural interests collide with its urban interests.

"You water down your primary focus," he said. "But you've got to get re-elected, and so you've got to advocate the issues of those who send you to represent them."

Let's sit down and just chat with Rep. Mel Watt

TIM FUNK

4 August 2003
Charlotte Observer (NC)

How well do you know your representative in Washington? This month, I'll re-introduce you to the Charlotte area's members of Congress. I sat down with them and asked the kinds of questions they don't usually get from the Capitol press corps. Their answers offer a glimpse of their personal side. This week: Rep. Mel Watt.

Q. Who was the first presidential candidate you ever voted for? In 1968 (when he was first eligible to vote), I was in law school and probably didn't vote. (In 1972, Watt voted for McGovern.)

Q. If you were president tomorrow, what's the first thing you'd do? Hope for an immediate vacancy on the Supreme Court so I could fill it.

Q. What's your favorite movie or TV show about politics? "West Wing" and the (movie) about the black guy who came to Washington. (Eddie Murphy's "The Distinguished Gentleman")."

Q. What's one of your biggest pet peeves? People who won't get to the point, who will give you every answer other than the answer to the question you've asked.

Q. When you're not on Capitol Hill or at home, where do you like to be? I love to be in the mountains.

Q. What public event or person shaped your life or political philosophy the most? The whole period of the civil rights movement.

Q. Is there a vote you wish you could take back? I can't think of one.

Q. What's been your proudest accomplishment as an elected official? Calling a press conference (in 1985, while in the N.C. Senate) and announcing that I was not going to run again (in order to spend more time with his teenage sons). It caught everybody off guard. I still think it was the most courageous and appropriate thing to do.

Q. Your idea of a good time? Listening to music and playing tennis.

Q. What really bores you? Driving long distances.

Q. What was your career goal at age 11? I didn't really start focusing on what I wanted to be until I was in the ninth grade. Some teacher

said, "You question everything. You must plan to be a lawyer." And from that point on, I would always say I wanted to be a lawyer, although I didn't know what that meant.

Q. Multiple choice: Leno, Letterman, "Nightline" or Charlie Rose? It depends. If there's a specific event that's going on in the world, I know I'm going to get a good, in-depth analysis from "Nightline." Otherwise, Letterman.

Q. As a cook, your best dish? I've been blessed: My mother was a good cook; my wife is a good cook. It was not something that I've had to do. Probably my wife would say I make a mean tuna fish sandwich.

Q. When you heard about the recent Supreme Court ruling on affirmative action, what did you think? I wanted to read it. It's one of the few Supreme Court decisions I've read since I came to Congress. I used to read them right off the press. This is one of the few I've read all the way through -- the dissents, the concurrences, the majority opinion. Fascinating.

Q. When you heard about the Supreme Court's ruling legalizing homosexual relationships? I didn't have any real reaction.

Q. Multiple choice: Elvis, Motown, The Beatles, Beethoven or Sinatra? Motown.

Q. Your favorite Motown hit? All the Supremes stuff. "Ain't No Mountain High Enough."

Q. If you could travel across the country with any person in history, who would it be? Supreme Court Justice) Thurgood Marshall would be a great person to have a long conversation with.

Q. Where were you on Nov. 22, 1963 (when JFK died)? I was on UNC's campus (in Chapel Hill). Probably studying.

Q. Where were you on Sept. 11, 2001? In a hearing of the Commercial and Administrative Law Subcommittee with (GOP Rep.) Bob Barr. He was the chairman, I was the ranking (Democratic) member. I kept saying, "We need to get these people out of here."

Q. What reading material would I find on your nightstand? A book about how you treat back injuries. (Watt said he injured his back years ago.)

Q. What exercise do you do? Play tennis.

Q. What's your favorite tourist spot in Washington? The White House, especially if it's occupied by a Democrat and more especially if he's from North Carolina.

Q. What's your nickname? I don't want to start that again. It's been gone for years. If I put it out there, it'll come back.

Q. What's your favorite quote? I say to my children: "Hang in there."

WATT FOR CONGRESS

6 September 2002

Greensboro News & Record

Mel Watt has ably represented the 12th Congressional District, which includes part of Guilford County, for the last decade. Kim Holley, his challenger in September's Democratic primary, provides no reason to unseat a popular and independent-minded member of Congress.

Watt has distinguished himself with a strong and consistent effort to modify trade agreements that disadvantaged North Carolina workers. He not only voted against fast track negotiating authority for President Bush, but also for President Clinton. Watt, an attorney and constitutional law aficionado, grounded his objections in the belief that fast track substantially weakened Congress' check on presidential power in matters of trade.

He also saw, before it became conventional wisdom, that these agreements lacked sufficient protection for existing industries and for workers displaced by unfair practices. Watt has stood by his position since his first term in 1993, when he penned a letter to then-Gov. Jim Hunt predicting the subsequent decline of Tar Heel State manufacturing.

Trade is not the only area where Watt has taken seemingly contrarian views. Although he is on record voting against vouchers, Watt says he could support the idea if the program were fully funded and participating schools had to take all applicants. These caveats fairly assure that Watt will never have to cast a pro-voucher vote, but his qualified support mirrors the split among his constituents.

Watt, 57, has used his membership in the House Financial Services Subcommittee to help craft recent legislation setting new corporate accountability standards. Yet he said the questions of expensing stock options and reconciling companies' tax and SEC filings still need to be resolved.

Holley, who has never before held elected office, aims too high by starting at the congressional level. Her well-intentioned energies might be better directed at local environmental and consumer issues.

Watt, by contrast, has shown he can tackle complex topics filtered through the lens of North Carolina's needs and then cast the votes that square with his conscience. Watt is the best choice for the District 12 Democratic nomination.

This is one vote Watt has for sure A little maneuvering gets his mom's home into the 12th District

CHARLES HURT

Observer Washington Bureau

1 September 2002

Charlotte Observer (NC)

For 57 years, Evelyn Herron has supported her son, U.S. Rep. Mel Watt, a Charlotte Democrat.

She reared him, fed him, clothed him, sent him to college and campaigned for him when he went into politics. But there's one thing she's never been able to do for him: vote.

Until now.

For the first time since Watt took office 10 years ago, his district has been redrawn to include his mother's west Charlotte home and the Dixie neighborhood where Watt grew up.

Watt freely admits he pulled some strings to squeeze his mother's Mount Olive Church Road home into his 12th District.

"It is one of the few favors I asked the legislature for during the whole redistricting mess," he said, referring to the legislature's long process of redrawing congressional districts to square with new population numbers from the 2000 Census.

Watt's district, which runs from Charlotte to Winston-Salem to Greensboro, is one of the nation's most debated and bizarrely shaped districts.

First drawn as a majority black district in 1990, Republicans and Democrats fought over it in court for the better part of a decade. During years of court battles, the district kept getting redrawn. Herron said she watched the district line ebb and flow right up to edge of her voting precinct. But the line never crossed over to include her house.

She got so desperate that she considered moving.

"I probably would have if I hadn't owned my own home," she said.

After the 2000 census, Watt decided he wasn't going to miss his mother's vote again.

"I didn't know he was trying to maneuver it until he came to church one Sunday and told me," Herron said. "He said, 'Mama, guess what? You're going to get to vote for me.' I said, 'Hallelujah! Finally.' "

Democrats and G.O.P. Hail Court's Districting Decision

April 19, 2001, Thursday, Late Edition – Final

By ADAM CLYMER

Republicans and Democrats both claimed victory today after the Supreme Court ruled that race could be an element in redistricting decisions so long as it was not the controlling factor.

Republicans, who pushed for majority black districts in the 1990's that concentrated the most reliably Democratic voters in a few districts, found vindication because in recent years the Supreme Court had thrown out districts it found to be based on race. Donald F. McGahn II, counsel to the National Republican Congressional Committee, called today's ruling "a good thing."

"It certainly acknowledges the validity of majority-minority districts," Mr. McGahn said.

Democrats took comfort in a fact that was not directly at issue in the case, *Easley v. Cromartie*. The 12th Congressional District of North

Carolina, in its latest form, is only 47 percent minority. Democrats took the court's approval to mean that states could satisfy the Voting Rights Act's demand of opportunity for minority candidates without having to concentrate huge majorities of black voters into a district.

Representative Martin Frost of Texas, who heads the Democrats' redistricting efforts, said, "The court has clearly thwarted Republican claims that states must pack minority voters into single districts -- thereby diluting their overall voting strength."

Both sides' arguments may be tested first in New Jersey, where Democrats back a redistricting plan for the Legislature that would break up three existing districts with majorities of black and Hispanic voters and spread these often reliably Democratic votes across a greater number of districts. Republicans have attacked the plan in court, saying it helps white Democrats but takes away the opportunities for minorities that already existed. It would also pose a challenge for Republicans whose new districts would gain Democratic voters.

Samuel Hirsch, a Washington lawyer representing the Democrats in the New Jersey case, said today's decision was helpful because it said that while race could be an element, it needed to be "properly balanced with party and other considerations." A federal court hearing on the case is scheduled for Tuesday.

There was no dispute over one impact of the decision. Norman Chachkin, director of litigation for the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, said the ruling "sends a pretty clear message that there is a heavy burden on white plaintiffs attacking plans to demonstrate that it is really not politics, but it is race" that led to the districting map.

Mr. McGahn agreed, saying there would be a "very high burden" on attacking districts because they had a black or Hispanic majority.

Edward Still, a lawyer here with Dickstein, Shapiro, Morin & Oshinsky who had worked on the case before joining his present firm, said the decision meant that "if the legislature says that they have a political reason for creating a plan, you can't nitpick that goal." Instead, Mr. Still said, those who attack a plan have the burden of showing that race was the predominant factor.

The North Carolina Legislature said that in drawing the district map

that was before the Supreme Court, it was seeking to maintain the party split of six Democrats and six Republicans in the state's House delegation. The earlier map, in which Representative **Melvin Watt**, a Democrat, was first elected in 1992, had been thrown out by the Supreme Court because it was not compact and it assembled black voters scattered along an Interstate highway.

David Canon, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin and the author of "Race, Redistricting and Representation" (1999, University of Chicago Press), said the significance of the decision was that it validated considering race in redistricting.

That idea had been called into question not by the specific language of past Supreme Court decisions, but by a string of Supreme Court rejections of maps that included districts drawn to elect blacks. Mr. Canon said it was now clear that the court's prohibition on using "race as a predominant factor means what it says."

"It doesn't mean race can never be used," he said.

After each side finished explaining why it thought the decision was good for its interests, it started attacking the other's motives.

John Morgan, a Republican expert on redistricting, said that with plans like New Jersey's, "Democrats are trying to undo the black-majority districts and restore a century of discrimination."

Mr. Frost replied, "We're going to do everything we can to protect all the existing minority districts," all but a handful of which are represented by Democrats. He said Republicans "want to pretend to be the friends of the black community, but they really want to pack minorities into as few districts as possible."

Representative Watt, whose district has been challenged all through the 1990's, said, "I am happy that the Supreme Court has finally closed this chapter."

But North Carolina, which gained a 13th House seat as a result of the 2000 census, will draw new maps, and Mr. Watt said, "I hope that the 5-4 split in the court's decision does not portend 10 more years of litigation."